

FIT TO EAT

A productive garden can be a beautiful garden full of colour, scent and cool, shady spaces

Words: Jacki Brown

Thinking of trying your hand at growing your own food in the backyard? Beautifying and improving your own environment by planting fruit, vegetables and herbs has many benefits including a self-sufficient and sustainable lifestyle. Working in a productive garden of your own improves your health, gives you a sense of achievement and can contribute to a sense of community.

While producing food from your own land and efforts can be very satisfying, it can also become very disappointing if your efforts don't pay off. That's why proper planning and preparation are essential for success. Plan the layout as well as which plants you'll use and prepare with good soil and good systems and processes so you're working smarter not harder. Start small and increase the area as you get comfortable taking care of the plants you have.

Tailor an individual design

Growing fruit and vegetables is not a one-size-fits-all solution; it needs to be tailored to suit local and personal conditions — for a start, how much fresh fruit and vegies you require and how much rainfall your area receives. However, there are many ready-made garden bed solutions, such as stainless-steel raised beds and plastic planters. These are useful for slotting into small spaces and established gardens.

The success of a productive landscape

depends on human input — different people will contribute differing degrees of creativity, planning, innovation and observation, as well as physical work. Therefore, the more people involved in the planning and implementing, the greater potential your garden will have, so get the family involved!

Even with the best intentions, research and planning, people are often concerned that a productive garden is going to be unattractive. However, this doesn't have to be the case — all the same design rules and principles apply with a productive garden. Productive landscapes are a philosophy if not a design style, but just as much design and forethought is required as any other style.

Key design principles apply

Design principles such as form, colour, line, scale and focal points all apply. Some design styles that are particularly suited include rustic, eclectic, earthy, cottage-type gardens or more formal parterre or potager styles reminiscent of traditional European or Middle Eastern gardens. Edible plants can also work in contemporary styles that utilise minimalism, mass planting and bold colours.

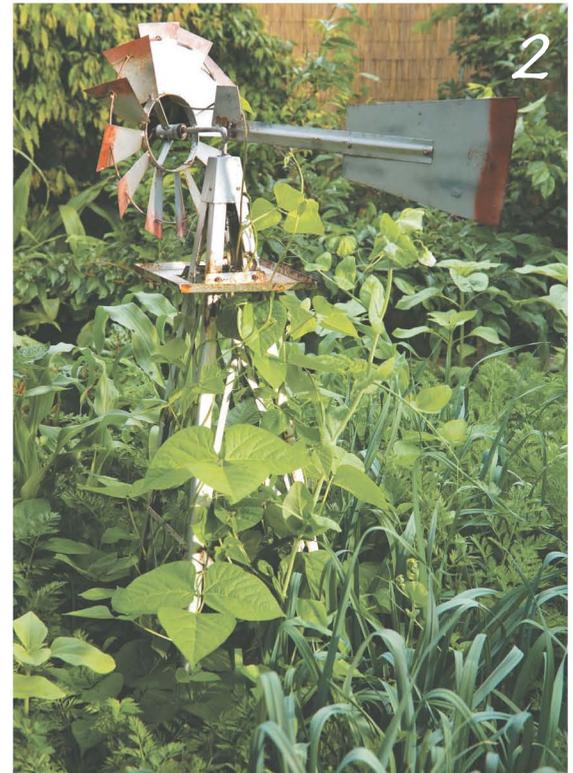
Creative displays of ornamental edible plants in high-visibility areas could contain kale, artichokes, chilli plants and lettuces. Raised garden beds made of hardwood sleepers or masonry blocks arranged creatively can give structure to a yard. Some other ways

to integrate food plants include mandala gardens, keyhole gardens and herb spirals. Whatever your preferred style, there are ways of incorporating fruit, vegetables and herbs.

Productive landscapes are all about function, so putting your planning efforts into function will guide the layout and design. Think about which areas will be used for growing vegetables, alfresco dining, herbs and utility areas — how much space do you need for each function and where are they best located? Permaculture principles say that the plants used most often, such as herbs and tomatoes, should be located closest to the house. Aim to have each element in the landscape serve multiple purposes, such as

1. Growing fruit trees is not just about growing produce. Here, fruit trees provide shade for an outdoor bench.
2. Mix decorative items such as fun sculpture in with your vegetable garden or use edible plants to frame artwork.
3. Herbs can be grown in the ground or in containers and planters of various sizes and styles. Tuscan pot from Yates.
4. If you like a challenge, grow your herbs and vegies from seed. Why not choose from Yates's organic-grown range?

- **Screen** an ugly fence or unwanted view with climbers such as passionfruit or grapes trained on a trellis, or with fruit trees espaliered along a north-facing boundary.
- **Shade** a walkway, pergola or arbour by covering the roof with fruit-producing climbers.
- **Decorative features** can be incorporated among the functional elements as with any other design style. Flow from water features can add movement and sound while oxygenating the water.
- **Groundcover herbs** such as thyme, rosemary or mint can cover otherwise bare patches of land such as under a clothesline or along the edge of a path.
- **Use gravel** or colourful mulch on paths to allow water to penetrate into the soil and feed nearby plant roots.
- **Vertical gardens** can transform a plain wall or fence into a decorative and productive feature. The same goes for the shed roof — why not convert it to a green roof?
- **Extend the green philosophy** from plants to structures. Storage sheds, planters, steppers, garden edging, compost bins and more can be made from recycled materials.



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food, building materials, firewood, energy production, firebreak, windbreak and flood mitigation.

Consider plant placement

Microclimates and solar aspect should also influence the placement of different functional spaces. Make the best use of aspect — north-facing is best for growing most fruit, vegetables and herbs but cooler, shady microclimates can be useful for some plants, for example strawberries, raspberries, mushrooms, ginger and mint. Shady, isolated areas might be better utilised as storage space if you have large areas of shade.

Think about the ways nature can work for you in your productive garden. Sunlight — angles at different times of year, its intensity, passive solar design, and energy. Wind — cooling breezes, hot and cold winds, pollination and energy. Other tools of nature include rainfall, frost, temperature, gravity, decomposition, soil micro-organisms, insect pollination and biodiversity. Keeping animals such as ducks, chickens or goats creates an additional dimension — the animals will do some of the weeding, fertilising and pest control for you!

You can also benefit nature and your neighbouring environment by improving the

water that comes into and out of your property with a rain garden — plants that filter water run-off as it passes through the foliage, roots and the soil medium beneath. Reuse of grey water in gardens also conserves water but make sure you include filter plants between the outlet and any food plants and alternate the location where grey water is used.

Try for multiple benefits

Companion planting has multiple benefits — flowering plants attract pollinators at different times of the year and increase the crop yield. Other plants have a fragrance that deters plant pests. Some common companions are rosemary, lavender and citrus.

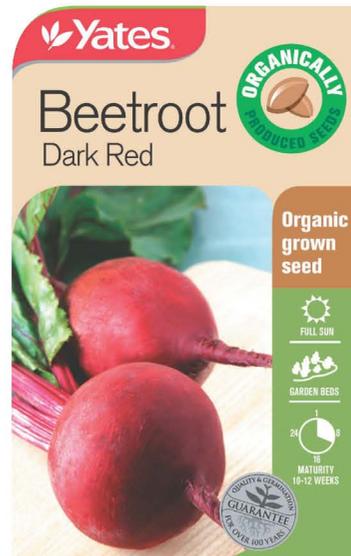
Green manure crops are living plants that are grown for the purpose of mixing into the soil to add nutrients — beans and peas are often used for this. Crop rotation prevents pest and disease build-up. Mixing species rather than having a monoculture prevents plague conditions of pests or fungus and promotes balance.

Productive gardens are more than just rows of vegetables, of course. They can also play a functional role (providing shade, screening etc) like other design styles. To make the most of your new productive garden, seek professional design advice. ■

This article was prepared by Jacki Brown and the team at ecodesign on behalf of the Australian Institute of Landscape Designers & Managers (AILDM). If you would like to find an AILDM member in your area, visit the website: www.aildm.com.au.



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